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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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POSSIBLE TRANSFER OF SOVIET SA-5s TO SYRIAN CONTROL

Summary

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We believe that the turnover process, whenever it begins, will be gradual. The Soviets, both for political reasons and to ensure operational effectiveness, are likely to maintain a substantial advisory presence at the missile complexes and within the command and control apparatus of the Syrian air defense network.

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Turning over the complexes to Syrian control would significantly lessen the risk to Soviet

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This memorandum was prepared by the Current Support Division of the Office of Soviet Analysis and the Arab-Israeli Division of the Office of Near East/South Asia Analysis. It has been coordinated with the Office of Scientific and Weapons Research. Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to the Chief, China/Third World Branch, SOVA,

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[redacted]

prestige in a Syrian-Israeli war and the likelihood of the USSR being drawn into direct involvement. At the same time, however, such a move would reduce Moscow's already limited influence on President Assad and might rekindle doubts abroad about the USSR's willingness to play a major role in the Middle East. [redacted]

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Syrian control of the missiles would increase the chances of their use in an Israeli-Syrian clash. The Israelis would be more likely to attempt to destroy the sites, and the Syrians would be more likely than the Soviets to use them in the event of an open Syrian-Israeli conflict.

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Implications

The USSR would derive some benefits from relinquishing control over the use of SA-5s and withdrawing Soviet units manning the sites. It would eliminate the dilemma Moscow would face if a major Israeli-Syrian conflict were to break out. On the one hand, the use of the SA-5s would almost certainly result in their destruction, significant Soviet casualties, and a blow to the USSR's military prestige. On the other hand, a Soviet refusal to fire them in a major conflict would undermine Moscow's credibility as an ally and severely damage its ties with Syria--the most important Soviet ally in the Middle East. Turning over the SA-5s would end the situation where the Soviets are, in effect, hostage to Damascus and subject to direct involvement in a major conflict against their better judgement.

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[redacted]

The liabilities for Moscow in withdrawing its air defense units would be as, if not more, significant. Introduction of the SA-5 units repaired most of the damage to the USSR's prestige in the Arab world that resulted from its inability to prevent the Israeli defeat of Syria and the PLO in Lebanon in 1982. Withdrawing the Soviet units--especially in the current environment with Syria widely perceived as under challenge from the United States and with the continued volatility of the situation in Lebanon--might rekindle doubts among the Arabs about the USSR's willingness to play a major role in the Middle East.

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Moscow might be concerned that Arab states would associate such a reduced Soviet role in Syria with other recent developments that suggest the USSR's current impotence in the Middle East:

- The low profile Moscow has taken since the summer toward the increasing US-Syrian tensions.
- Soviet inability to help another key Arab ally--PLO chief Arafat--fend off a Syrian-backed challenge to his leadership.

Moscow might fear that such a perception of Soviet weakness could encourage Arab states to rely more heavily on the US to broker an Arab-Israeli peace settlement.

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More concretely, despite the reduced risks for the Soviets if they withdrew their SA-5 units, they would forfeit a degree of control over Syria's decision to go to war. By manning the SA-5s, the Soviets have final say over the missiles' use and presumably could restrain Assad by refusing to fire them. They probably believe that he would be less cautious than they are in using the missiles, making an escalation of a future conflict with Israel more likely. Having removed its air defense forces, Moscow would have less at stake in such a confrontation, but it would still come under heavy pressure from the Syrians to come to their aid militarily. In addition, although the Soviets could blame Syrian ineptitude if the missiles were destroyed after their forces left, doubts would again emerge in the Arab and Third Worlds about the quality of Soviet weaponry.

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In Damascus, transfer of control over the SA-5s probably would be seen as a mixed blessing. It almost certainly would be well received by the Syrian military, which has bridled over the sovereign Soviet control of the SA-5 complexes and which would be assuming command of a highly sophisticated air defense system. But Assad probably would also reason that Moscow's commitment to come to Syria's defense would be diminished if Soviet units--and the prestige they represent--were not directly threatened.

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The Syrians probably would be more likely than the Soviets to use the SA-5s once an Israeli-Syrian conflict was underway, but short of open conflict Assad would be unlikely to fire the missiles or threaten their use. He almost certainly calculates that the departure of the Soviet units would remove a key impediment to an Israeli preemptive strike. A Syrian threat to use the missiles consequently would run a higher risk of inviting Israeli raids inside Syria--a dangerous course for Assad. In addition, Assad probably realizes that, even with a substantial residual Soviet presence, the SA-5 system would be less effective under Syrian control. [REDACTED]

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The Israelis would probably prefer to see the Soviet SA-5 units withdrawn and the missiles turned over to the Syrians. However, with the missiles in Syrian hands, Tel Aviv's concern over Assad's intentions might increase the chances of an Israeli strike against the complexes. Since the installation of the missiles, Tel Aviv has been apprehensive about the danger of a Soviet-Israeli clash resulting from an attack on the complexes, and the presence of these Soviet combat units has clearly had a restraining effect on the Israelis. Removal of the Soviet units would allow the Israelis, in the event of broader regional conflict or a Syrian-Israeli clash, to attack the sites with less fear of a Soviet reaction. [REDACTED]

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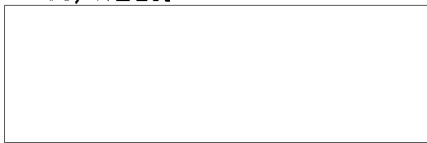

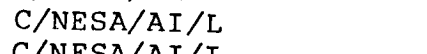
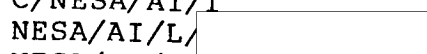





Some Israelis, however, are nervous about the possibility of complete Syrian control over the missiles. A respected defense journalist recently noted that it is in Israel's interest to have Moscow control advanced weaponry in Syria because the Soviets are more cautious and more concerned with the global implications of their actions than the Syrians. Given control over the SA-5s, the journalist observed, the Syrians might be eager to use them against Israel, increasing the prospects for a broader regional war. We believe these concerns are shared by influential members of Israel's political and defense establishment. [REDACTED]

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